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### Marathi and the Maharashtrian Community

“Can we speak in Marathi?” was the first thing she asked me when she stepped inside. Me and Naina, both first graders, were only just getting to know each other. It was the first time I had invited her over to my house. She was one of the first friends I had made at school, where we primarily conversed in English. So when I answered yes, not only did I see a momentary relief in her eyes, but also a sense of comfort and happiness in knowing we could speak the language that we both identified with the most. This, I believe, is one of the most beautiful things about languages. They allow us to make connections with others in our lives; languages bind people together and help create communities. My purpose of interviewing Naina, therefore, was to understand how the Marathi language, along with any other languages she knew, were passed down to her by her family. I also longed to know if there were any literacy practices that connected her to the Maharashtrian culture and how valuable they were to her.

Naina was born in a small district called Chalisgaon in the state of Maharashtra. Like me she was brought up in Pune as part of the Maharashtrian community. In addition to Marathi, Naina grew up speaking two more languages - English and Hindi. She believes that languages are not taught through textbooks or courses but rather absorbed by observation of others around speaking those same languages. Her language skills were shaped by her grandparents - two of

whom were English professors, and one- a Marathi professor. Having this linguistic knowledge in her family helped her hone her language skills in both Marathi and English. In fact, she even thinks that due to this rich linguistic background, the way languages were passed down to her were different than in most other families.

Me: Did them (her grandparents) being professors change the way they passed on the language to your parents as against how your parents passed on the language to you?

Naina: I think they being professors... the way they passed on the languages to my parents was similar to the way my parents passed on the languages to me. But I think there might be a difference in the way these languages got passed on in our family versus in other families. Like we used to watch art films, read books and discuss books. I used to go and ask them the meaning of this word, that word. So that was the primary way the language got passed on.

As I think of the ways I learned the same languages, I realize that it was not as much of a creative process as it was in Naina's families. While I learned the majority of my English language skills at school, my Marathi skills were honed by reading Marathi newspapers at home - a process quite distinct from Naina's. Yet again, this shows that families play an integral role in shaping the literacy activities that children take up.

I was further interested if Marathi helped her connect to any communities or cultures. To this, she said that the primary language of the state of Maharashtra was Marathi. This meant that anything that tied her to Maharashtrian culture was "primarily Marathi-based." She further added: "So speaking that language (Marathi) of course opens up a lot of avenues for cultural folk songs, folk stories, dances, and, you know, plays, books. So, definitely, knowing that

language and speaking it well has helped me know more about the history and the culture of my state.” For Naina, one culturally significant text that she read - passed down to her by her grandfather - was a book on Shivaji Maharaj - the king of the Maratha empire. This book, written in Marathi by Babasaheb Purandare - a very well-regarded historian in Maharashtra - is considered a classic. It describes Shivaji Maharaj’s life and his reign as the king of the Maratha empire in the 16th century. As a Maharashtrian myself, I understand how important this story is to the Maharashtrian community. Even though I have not read the same book as Naina has, I grew up reading children’s books and watching TV series made on the life of Shivaji Maharaj. This, I believe, is a great example of literacies being used as “cultural storehouses” (Krichevsky 108). They are important tools in preserving one’s cultural history and heritage. It also explains why they are valuable to families.

Another literacy practice that connects Naina to the Maharashtrian community is acting. Naina was introduced to acting classes by her parents who were involved in theater-activities at college level. As her passion for acting grew, she began doing acting workshops, stage plays, and eventually bagged a role in a Marathi movie. The basic difference between the Marathi industry and Bollywood, she said, was the target audience. The Marathi industry served a much smaller (and primarily Marathi) audience compared to Bollywood. What this means, however, is that they have to be very careful with the way they use the language in the film. For instance, they have to be very specific with their pronunciations because the Marathi audience is very sensitive about that. Naina mentioned that it was important for them to use the Devanagari script (the script that Marathi is traditionally written in) instead of English alphabets so that they

could be right on-point with their pronunciations. While I was aware of the fading presence of the Devanagari script in my generation, I was glad to know that it still held importance in the Maharashtrian community.

I further asked Naina if being raised speaking the same language as her mother tongue prepared her for the role in any way. To this, she said:

“I think the simplest explanation for this that I can give is that when you're performing under pressure, you don't actually know the lines by heart. You're gonna miss out here and there... so when you're comfortable with the language, even if you miss out, you're gonna say something that means the same and you're gonna say it grammatically correct and meaningful, right?”

This reminded me of that visceral connection that people experience with their mother tongue. Even though Naina knows three languages, she “identifies” with Marathi in a way that she doesn't with other languages. I experience this same connection with Marathi in my daily literacy activities. There is a certain solace in speaking your mother tongue.

Interviewing Naina helped me understand the value of languages and the role of literacy activities in preserving linguistically-rooted cultures and communities. Family-based literacy activities are focused towards passing down linguistic knowledge while also helping children learn more about their history and culture. Literacies that develop later on in life and outside of the family, on the other hand, help people understand the wider implications of the language they use and its effect on the community. Most importantly, I learned that literacies are important tools in passing down information over generations and that they can help shape

individual identity.